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"Great Beginnings" -- President's Speech to the Faculty

Aug-30-2006

Eastern Illinois University President Lou Hencken welcomed faculty members during the annual back-to-school Faculty Luncheon on Wednesday, Aug. 30, in the Grand Ballroom. Following are his remarks:

As most of you know, for about 15 years, I have had the privilege of going to work each morning in the Livingston C. Lord Administration Building, known universally as Old Main.

I feel honored to walk into that building every morning because I know that I am standing on hallowed ground.

And I've felt doubly honored during the last five years, since I have been privileged to work in the same room where Livingston Lord worked -- where he sat at that massive roll-top desk which is still on display in the University Archives, working for 34 years to establish the character of this institution.

If Emerson was correct -- if "every institution is the lengthened shadow of one man" -- then all of us who stand in his shadow know that Livingston Lord is still with us in spirit, and that his dream for this very special place will never die.

If Livingston Lord were with us today, not just in spirit, but in person, these remarks would be a good deal shorter.

He would sometimes begin his remarks in the chapel service by instructing the faculty and students on good grooming or some of the finer points of etiquette.

The faculty and student body never knew quite how he would begin or end, but on one occasion he ended with words which are on the masthead at the Daily Eastern News: "Tell the truth and don't be afraid."

My remarks won't be quite as concise or quite as lofty, because I have more ordinary matters to discuss.

To start with, I have a window to fix.

It's on my "To Do List" -- the list of things I hope to accomplish before leaving office.

Preparing a "To Do List" is a beneficial exercise which I heartily recommend to any of you who have not had that pleasure.

We may not complete everything on our list, but it's a good start -- a great beginning.

"Great Beginnings" -- that is the title of my comments today as we experience yet another Great Beginning for the 111-year-old "work in progress" known as Eastern Illinois University.

An institution this old -- old enough to count its age in centuries -- has experienced countless Great Beginnings. It starts over again each fall. It begins a new academic year each August, another new chapter in the remarkable history of this remarkable institution.

The old and the new -- continuity and change -- are what give institutions like this one their unique character.

Even in this fast-moving, constantly changing world, there is surely a place for ancient institutions with esteemed missions, particularly if those institutions renew themselves each fall -- experience Great Beginnings every August, just as Eastern Illinois University has done, year after year, since 1895.

We greet a new freshman class -- The Class of 2010 -- and a new group of transfer students -- The Class of 2008 -- welcoming them to what I am confident will be a great beginning for them, as well.

Their arrival enriches the character of our community as we celebrate the diversity which they represent...as we renew our energy through their youth and enthusiasm...as we welcome them to a new chapter in their lives.

A Great Beginning.

I still remember my own arrival here as a student. What a Great Beginning it was for me.

Since I am beginning my final academic year, you might think it mildly peculiar that "Great Beginnings" is the title of my remarks today. But I am sure that I have done other things during the past years that you thought were mildly peculiar.

But the most important part of the job description of any departing president is to help set the stage for a Great Beginning for the arriving president.

If we had all the money in the world, we could virtually insure a Great Beginning for our new president. But we don't have unlimited funding. What we do have is the unlimited loyalty of our alumni, students, and friends; the unlimited affection of the communities we serve; and the unlimited dedication of a committed and talented faculty and staff.

And so the task of setting the stage for a Great Beginning for our new president is not a "Mission Impossible" for me, because it is not my task alone.

It's the obligation of all of us.

It's an opportunity for each of us.

Each one of us here today can do something to leave this place better than we found it. Each of us can prepare our own personal "To Do List" to smooth the way for the arrival of our new president so that she or he can lead this remarkable institution into a new chapter in its distinguished history: a truly Great Beginning for a truly Great University.

I promise not to tell you everything that appears on my "To Do List."

Instead, I would like to tell you about only three items on my list.

I have chosen those three particular items because they have something in common. They each deal with the changing face of our campus -- visible things which are part of the first impression people have of us when they come here. First impressions which, once made, are hard to change. First impressions of things symbolic of what our priorities are, what is important to us as an institution, and as a community, a university family.

The first such item is our Doudna Fine Arts Center, destined to be one of the signature buildings on our campus. Last year I stated that construction fences are beautiful because they represented progress in the form of new and renovated buildings on campus. Dr. Lord told me this past spring, as we were admiring the newly renovated Blair Hall, that construction fences are even more beautiful when removed!

I can safely say, that with one exception - and it is a major exception - all construction fences will be removed on campus by Thanksgiving.

As the Doudna Fine Arts Center will near completion during my final months in office, one of the most important tasks for me and for all of us in Old Main is to keep that project moving forward "with all deliberate speed," and to insure that it is built right -- built to last for centuries. It will be an important part of my job to assist Jill Nilsen and her staff, Jim Johnson and his staff - to keep working closely with our colleagues at the Foundation -- to raise funds to provide the necessary programming for that extraordinary building.

As some of you know, we have conducted a feasibility study as to various fundraising alternatives. We were deeply gratified by the loyalty and affection this University enjoys among the various constituencies interviewed. And we are cautiously optimistic that our fund raising efforts will be successful, including those relating to

1. The establishment of additional scholarships,
2. Addressing deferred maintenance in the North Quadrangle, and most of all,
3. Those dealing with the Fine Arts Center.

The second project on my list relates to what most of you know as the Textbook Rental Building. Within the next 12 to 18 months, we plan to begin building a new textbook rental building to be located near Greek Court, so that various academic offices, including the Honors Program and Nursing Program, can move into the old textbook rental facility -- suitably renovated for that purpose -- the latest chapter in the life of one of our oldest buildings.

As some of you know, the Textbook Rental Building has had many functions over the years. It was once a gymnasium attached to Pemberton Hall. The building itself has no name. And so, if any of you here today would like to see your name on a building -- and if you have your checkbook with you -- please see me before you leave.

It is a jewel of a building -- dignified and stately, classically proportioned -- with beautiful windows.

Symbolism is important, and moving the Honors Program to that highly visible location in the heart of the North Quad is an important symbol of what is important in the life of this institution.

Item 1 -- Keep the new Fine Arts Center moving forward and raise money to fully implement its programming needs.

Item 2 -- A new life for one of our oldest buildings.

And that brings me to Item 3 -- back to where I started -- back to that window I have to fix. The one that's on my "To Do List."

It's not actually broken, the way windows so often get broken by an exuberant undergraduate with a baseball.

But we still need to fix it, because it's worn out. It leaks at the edges. It no longer keeps the heat out in the summer nor the cold when winter comes.

And, of course, it's a pretty big window, so I won't be able to fix it alone. I'll need a lot of help -- your help, I hope.

The window in question (you've all seen it, of course) is eight feet tall and 60 feet wide. It runs the length of the bridge which connects the two wings of this building, and as you leave here today, most of you will walk by it again, as you have done so often over so many years.

The window -- the one that's worn out, the one we need to replace -- looks out over the library quadrangle toward the new Fine Arts Center. Since it will look out toward the beautiful Booth Library, and a work of art -- our newest signature building, the Doudna Fine Arts Building -- it occurred to me that perhaps the window itself could be a work of art.

I propose that the window project be entitled "Great Beginnings" -- another symbol -- a symbol of the "university experience" in the lives of our students.

Etched into the glass will be some Great Beginnings in literature -- the first line of a great book . . . or a great play . . . or a great poem . . . or a great speech -- that echoes down to us over the ages.

Great beginnings like the one that many of our students could recite from memory, here in the Land of Lincoln:

"Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

Or this from "A Tale of Two Cities" by Charles Dickens:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

Or a quote from Martin Luther King Jr.:

"We must learn to live together as brothers, or perish together as fools."

Or

"I look to a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

The historic and literary selections to be included, and the design of the window project, will be determined by a university-wide competition, one in which all members of the university family can share.

The initial phase of the competition will be to select the opening lines -- great beginnings -- from great literature, to be etched into the glass from among suggestions made by you:

-- Words that are particularly provocative or penetrating.

-- Words that have been meaningful in your life.

-- Words that will be an influence for good in the lives of the future generations of students who will pass through these halls.

-- Words that are worthy of the man for whom this building is named.

-- Words that will reflect the rich diversity represented on this campus

I hope that many of you will offer your own suggestions and that many of our students, alumni, and friends will do the same.

I am proposing that a University committee composed of faculty, staff and students determine the phrases that would be embedded in our "Great Beginnings Window."

In addition to the satisfaction of having their suggestions carved into the very fabric of the university, fabulous prizes will be given to the winning contestants. Each of them will receive a t-shirt with his or her suggestion printed on one side and "Great Beginnings -- a Window to our Future" on the other.

The window will be fabricated and installed next summer, prior to the installation of our new president.

And the first duty of our new president will be to unveil the new window -- a window to our future -- Great Beginnings -- for a great university, a changing institution, in a changing world, but always true to our heritage. Always remembering the admonition of Livingston Lord.

"Tell the truth," he said.

"And don't be afraid."

Just some old-fashioned sentiments of a long-departed president? Hopelessly naive?

I don't think so.

And I don't think you do either.

His words define the fundamental values upon which this University was founded 111 years ago. They are the bedrock foundation on which it stands today.

How the University continues to respond to that admonition will be the most important part of the job description of the person chosen to be our next president -- surely the most important part of the job description of anyone who has ever held that office. And in a very real sense, the most important part of the job description of everyone here today as we begin a new academic year.

The most important part of the job of everyone in this room.

Because even though there have been many Great Beginnings in the history of this great university.

Even though there will continue to be many Great Beginnings throughout its future.

Even though this is a "work-in-process."

Even though this is a changing institution.

The most important things must never be permitted to change. Including our commitment, as a community, to those words of Livingston Lord. Part of our shared vision for this ancient and honorable institution, and our shared duty as well -- the solemn duty of every one of us, regardless of our title -- to insure that in this new academic year and in all the academic years to come, every member of this University community, from the most senior professor to the youngest freshman, will always be free to search for and to tell the truth and never be afraid.

I wish all of us well as we begin the new school year, and ask us to remember that the reason that each and every one of us is here is to provide the best educational opportunities possible for our students. Let us all have a Great Beginning.

Louis V. Hencken, President, Eastern Illinois University